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Interactivity: New Rules of Engagement for the Humanities

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Interactivity: New Rules of Engagement for the Humanities

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Abstract

This journal is a result of our frustration with 21st century humanities scholarship and dissemination. The term “digital” humanities has gained a certain cache and indeed, bringing technology into humanities research was, and still is, an important hurdle to overcome. However, humanities conversations on the topic have stalled and can’t seem to move beyond defining digital humanities. We believe that much of this stagnation is due to the emphasis on a superficial understanding of technology as a mode of delivery rather than as a mode of inquiry. Digital media and tools do allow for better and faster ways of doing traditional humanities things like scholarship and education. However, the failure of the digital humanities movement to look beyond media transformation and towards new modes of inquiry, blocks the humanities from evolving. The stubborn insistence on clinging to traditional forms of humanities scholarship at the expense of innovation is holding the field back. If, as McLuhan hypothesizes, the “medium is the message,” then why is the humanities still so doggedly focused on the content? We envision this journal as a forum to generate new ideas and ways of thinking about the humanities.

Key Words

Digital Humanities, Interactive Media, Interactive Humanities

I. HUMANITIES 1.0: THE DISCIPLINARY DIVIDE

When asked to define the humanities, the response generally describes an academic discipline that attempts to understand and critique the human experience. In practice, this definition of the traditional humanities is better understood by

defining what it is *not*...i.e. humanities is *not* science. However, the humanities are very much more than the isolated monolith we have come to know. In fact, humanities disciplines represent a specific mode of inquiry and engagement with the world through the lens of the human experience. Although the sharp divide between humanities and sciences seems fundamental, it is, in fact, completely artificial. For example, it is easy to say that creating a hypothesis for a chemistry experiment is purely a scientific endeavor. However, developing a hypothesis is a process that takes place firmly within the cultural context of the scientist. That is, the scientist

understands the science within an existing human framework. The truth is that we can never escape the humanities. It's everywhere.

There seems to be a fear within the humanities that it will be somehow overtaken by technology or science. And so, there persists a tendency to differentiate the humanities portion of scholarship, projects and curriculum from the other disciplines. The truth is absolutely contrary to this tendency, however. Breaking down the imaginary boundaries that divide out the humanities discipline is not a weakness. Fusing the humanities into all aspects of research and inquiry will add tremendous value to all fields of study, the humanities included. Humanities modes of inquiry are real and important. The dividing lines between disciplines are imaginary and unimportant. The time is right for true inter-disciplinarity, where the humanities and other fields have equal footing and true reciprocation. Equal footing of the disciplines within a project will help foster different perspectives and new understanding.

II. HUMANITIES 2.0: THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

The current trend in the humanities is the drive to incorporate computational methods with traditional humanities scholarship. Given the deceptively descriptive moniker, Digital Humanities, scholars have moved towards incorporating digital things into their work. However, no one seems to really know what this means exactly. On one hand, digital humanities is viewed as being a means of improved public outreach, a vehicle by which the humanities disciplines can reach a broader audience in an interesting manner: for example, public humanities and digital heritage. On the other hand, digital humanities allow new ways for processing and presenting information, such as data mining and visualization techniques. However, both of these

approaches are simply format changes for traditional humanities content. What impact, we must ask, will digital have on the future of the humanities?

The most common definitions describe digital humanities as a synthesis between computational techniques and traditional humanities activities. Many definitions include vague terms like intersections to describe humanities – digital combination. When viewed against the history of other media development, like print to film, the vagueness is understandable as a transformation of format takes time to truly mature and come into its own. Digital humanities are still at the earliest stages of transfer from one form to another which explains the current fixation on technique and technology rather than effect and experience. For example, a project to transform the collected works of Shakespeare into a web based format is merely a technology shift: the transformation of text and image into digital. The act of that transformation does not open the door to new research questions outside of the transformation process. The research focuses on how to transform, not on new modes of inquiry and expression. Analogous to the early days of film, where technical exploration did not directly open the field to more powerful filmic experiences, the technical aspects of digital humanities will not magically create innovative humanities projects. If anything, digital transformation has a tendency to place the emphasis on the technology instead of the humanities experience.

The unintended consequence of digital humanities is that it continues to reinforce old silos. Digital humanities claims to be interdisciplinary but, at best, the work appears to be multidisciplinary instead. There isn't a strong blending, or true Interdisciplinarity, between the different scholarly activities. Projects appear divided with the humanities scholars compiling content to lob over

to the technologists side so they can then build something. Currently, digital humanities projects are run by two camps that meet once at the beginning and the end. Digital humanities needs to learn that simply having an idea is not enough, creating the media is a synergetic process that is more than the content. Creating something from an idea is a mountain that requires a team to scale.

III. HUMANITIES 3.0: INTERACTIVE INTEGRATION

If digital humanities are not the answer, what is? In this journal we have coined the phrase *Interactive Humanities* to define the digital – humanities intersection further. *Interactive Humanities* takes the emphasis off the digital and places it on the ways an audience may engage with the humanities content in the broadest possible sense. As such it is not about format, it is about experience. The lens of interactivity forces a re-assessment of humanities activities. It requires adapting the roles of technologists and humanists to engage with the process and material differently. The technologist is no longer relegated to humanities implementer, but instead is now responsible for creating mechanisms and techniques to encourage interactivity and engagement with the content. The humanist is no longer the “content expert” but must now create content within the context of interactive affordances.

For the scholars on both sides, this opens new questions to be explored. Analogous to writing a monograph, creating interactive media requires substantial research and critical thinking and, in addition, demands new interpretation of the content. The experience of creating digital media is the journey, as is writing a traditional narrative. But it is a different type of journey requiring new perspective and balance. The most obvious perspective shift is the potential for audience agency in interactive

media design. The interactive process drives the mode of experience and investigation and, in fact, implies choice. The audience now has agency, guided agency to be sure, but the scholar can now step down from the tyrannical control of the expert voice. How can these questions of agency transform humanities scholarship, education and outreach?

IV. INTERACTIVE HUMANITIES: THE JOURNAL

The intention of the journal is to crack the door, and to begin a conversation about moving the discussion beyond the technical. The humanities of the 21st century have the opportunity to radically transform. In order to be a better technologist, one needs to be a better humanist. Likewise, to be a better humanist, one must be a better technologist. However, the technology expertise important here is not digital but as the moderator of the interactive experience.

The journal seeks research, projects and discussion that seek to explore ways of radically transforming humanities scholarship.

- Examples of projects that tackle new design challenges which integrate agency with humanities questions.
- Humanities in the classroom: Work that explores breaking down the divide between academic disciplines by incorporating humanities perspectives in non-humanities classes or vice versa
- Humanities in the community: Work that explores interdisciplinary projects for outreach and education
- Interacting with humanities content: Discussion and research on new ways of interdisciplinary methods both digital and non-digital.